

Forney volunteers successfully evacuated from Lebanon

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Amy and Ron Byrd embrace as a prayer of thanksgiving is offered before a bus delivers them to their home church, First Baptist in Forney. She was part of a team from the church that was stranded in Lebanon when war broke out. She and the rest of the volunteer team had just arrived at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport after being evacuated from Lebanon. (Photo by Bill Bangham/BP)

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By **Angela Best**

Communications Intern

FORNEY—A volunteer missions team from First Baptist Church in Forney that had to be evacuated from Lebanon testified they found God’s peace in the midst of chaos and confusion.

“God can bring peace when it feels like there is no reality of that,” said team member Amy Byrd.

“I think it’s truly a comforting feeling to know that you are in the middle of God’s will—to be able to rest in his sovereignty,” echoed James Walker, fellow team member and East Texas Baptist University student.

The Forney volunteers—and another Southern Baptist mission team from Eagle’s Landing First Baptist Church in McDonough, Ga.—were safely evacuated from Beirut, as was Jennifer Wallace, a short-term volunteer with the American Baptist Churches International Ministries who had worked at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary.

The 10-member team from Forney originally set out for an eight-day mission trip to Beirut to minister among the city’s Muslim community. They planned to go door-to-door to share their Christian faith and pass out Arabic New Testaments.

Four days later, the trip dramatically changed. Pastor Jimmy Pritchard of Forney and another team member were riding in a cab when their driver became animated after hearing a report over the radio. Israel had bombed Lebanon in response to a Hezbollah raid.

With violence escalating throughout the day, the Forney team booked the earliest available flight out of Lebanon. But the Beirut airport was bombed the day before their flight was to leave, stranding all who were trying to get out of the city.

“It was just surreal,” Pritchard said.

Fearing for their safety, the team members moved to a hotel in the mountainous region of east Beirut. From there, they witnessed the bombing of southern Beirut.

When the hotel filled with refugees, the team moved to the Arab Baptist Theological Semi-nary where they were welcomed “with open arms” by the Lebanese Baptists, Pritchard said.

Despite the ongoing attacks, the team was overcome by God’s presence in the city the following day when members attended a worship service at the largest Baptist church in Beirut.

Even though the ride to the church was harrowing, Byrd said, “From the moment we walked in there, just a peace and a sincere knowledge that God was in control over things took over.”

The team stepped into the church to the sounds of the organist practicing the hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” and Pritchard was set to teach from Proverbs 18:10, “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.”

During his introduction to the congregation, an explosion occurred, and missiles intermittently struck the city throughout the service.

Walker recalled seeing an elderly man laying his head on one of the team member’s shoulders, praying and crying out to God: “Here these people are, coming out of their homes, coming so close to destruction to worship.

I've never seen Christ's love displayed like that before in my life."

Lebanese Baptists watched over the volunteer missionaries until they left Beirut July 20. That day, the team worked through Lebanese military checkpoints and boarded the USS Nashville for an overnight trip to the airport in Cyprus, Greece.

A few days later, the team arrived safely back in Texas.

"Our team was incredibly strong," Pritchard said. "If anybody had any fear, it was not evident. The Lord protected us and gave us a sense of peace."

Peace—as well as a greater sense of God's love and a trip that the team members will likely not soon forget. "This was absolutely the greatest adventure of my life," Byrd said. "And the Lord willing, I'm going back."

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